Progressing a Taxonomy of Possible Reflexivities: Guidelines For Reflexive Practice in Consumer Research

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Reflexivity has been identified in consumer research (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, Hirschman 1993, Thompson 2002) and in the wider social sciences (e.g. Wasserfall, 1993, Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003) as a useful way to address power and control in the research encounter, to attend to the researcher/researched dynamic and to give insightful commentaries into the research process itself. The purpose of this paper is to develop a more structured approach to what reflexivity is and how it might be achieved. More specifically this paper progresses the authors’ recent work on researcher reflexivity which produced a formal taxonomy of the different reflexivities which might be enacted within consumer research (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2005). This taxonomy has been developed further in this work and augmented with practical guidelines for the different approaches to reflexivity to guide the reflexive consumer researcher.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Reflexivity has been identified in consumer research (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, Hirschman 1993, Thompson 2002) and in the wider social sciences (e.g. Wasserfall, 1993, Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003) as a way to address power and control in the research encounter, to attend to the researcher/researched dy- namic and to give insightful commentaries into the research process itself. The ‘reflexive turn’ (Weick 1999) has emerged in the social sciences largely as a response to the notion that data collection and analysis is a neutral activity, a technology of knowledge making in which the researcher can take a disinterested, objective position in relation to their research. Reflexivity instead is used to highlight the personal, interpersonal, emotional, institutional, disciplinary and pragmatic influences on the research, as well as the methodological, epistemological and ontological assumptions built in to specific approaches (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). As such, reflexivity has been seen as a route to more accountable and responsible research, and as a stimulus to better accounts of the social and cultural world.

Researcher reflexivity has been conceptualised in consumer research discourse as a sub type of introspection. It is argued that there is much to recommend reflexivity as a practice in consumer research as it will ‘improve our understanding of the actual research process’ and act as such to develop consumer research theory (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993:355). Additionally it has been seen as a way to address the power issues in consumer research and specifically the instrumentality of the researcher/respondent relationship. For example, Hirschman (1993:551) advocates a more reflexive approach to research, and argues against the use of detached and ‘objective’ methods in consumer research. She ex- horts consumer researchers to ‘choose to abandon any method or practice that is premised on power inequalities between researcher and subject’ she argues that research should be designed which recognises respondents as ‘equal sentient beings’.

Although it is clear that consumer researchers have found the idea of reflexivity attractive and recognised its potentials, there is a need to develop the discourses already apparent in consumer research and formalise the conceptualisation and operation of this research approach. Currently, despite significant discourse around the issue in the wider social sciences there seems to be a lack of discourse around reflexivity in consumer behaviour research and although reflexive practice is evident in some work, the research processes around reflexive research are not articulated clearly, and a plethora of different approaches are evident. The aim of this paper is to stimulate essential new discourse around the practice of reflexivity. In order to do this it is necessary to formalise and structure reflexive practices as a foundation and basis for discus- sion. This work examines the many different reflexivity which might be enacted within consumer research and their concomitant implications and foundations. To accomplish this it provides a taxonomy of ‘possible reflexivity’ to structure the debate around this element of consumer research and to guide the potentially reflexive consumer researcher. The possible reflexivity which emerge from this study are envisaged as ‘Objectivist Reflexivity’, ‘Experiential Reflexivity’, ‘Perspectival Reflexivity’ and ‘Multi- plex Reflexivity’. The possibilities we have identified are distin- guished by the dimensions of ontology and power in the research encounter; this position, we believe, reflects closely key issues in contemporary consumer research. In terms of ontology, we re- flected upon reflexivity as it has been seen as a route to better knowledge and enhanced theory building through reflection on the process of research. This to us suggested questions and challenges arising pertaining to the ‘reality’ of the research process, not just in terms of what ‘really’ happened, but the models of reality implied in different reflexive approaches. Different types of reflexivity, like different research approaches, carry their own ontological assump- tions about the nature of subjects (researcher and researched) and what knowledge is and how it is constructed. These assumptions are clearly crucial to the conceptualisation of multiple reflexivity and render attempts to achieve closure around the notion of reflexivity as a singular concept highly problematic. Attending to ontology as one of the axes in our taxonomy allowed us to structure our theorising to account for this multiplicity of reflexivity and the constitutive and generated realities they imply. In terms of power, this pertains to reflexivity as a route to addressing the power imbalances and issues inherent in any research encounter, whether that be conceptualised in terms of an overt remit for an emancipatory research politics, or as a way to direct the researcher encounter towards one with less of a dominating and instrumental dynamic. For us, reflexivity is inherently political; our exposure to it initially emerged from our own engagement with feminist theory and our identification as feminist researchers. Reflexivity has been seen by feminist researchers (and other critical researchers) as a political tool for critically engaging with power issues in research (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Underpinning the different types of reflexivity in our taxonomy are assumptions relating to the nature of power in the researcher/respondent relationship and these different reflexivity also generate different (and sometimes am- bivalent) power relations in the research encounter. In terms of this constitutive and generative relation to power we found that the taxonomy of reflexivity was a useful tool to reflect in a more structured manner upon the shifts in the researcher/respondent power dynamic which occurred at different parts of our own research. As Wolf (1996) has argued, power differentials are an inevitable part of research, and the necessity is to critically reflect upon these inevitable differentials and the way that these shift and transform as the research progresses. Attending to power as one axis of our taxonomy allowed us to structure our thinking about reflexivity in terms of these shifting power relations.

This paper progresses the authors’ recent work on researcher reflexivity which has been developed and augmented with practical guidelines for the different approaches to reflexivity. Guidelines for practical action and points for reflection are given which relate to each of the possible reflexivity outlined in the taxonomy.